

## A Survey of English Translations of the Quran

By Dr. Abdur Rahim Kidwai

Despite the historical fact that the early Muslim community's stand on the translation of the Arabic text of the Quran was ambivalent, as indeed, the general Muslim attitude remains so to this day, the act of translation may be logically viewed as a natural part of the Muslim exegetical effort. However, whereas the idea of interpreting the Quran has not been so controversial, the emotional motives behind rendering the Quranic text into languages other than Arabic have always been looked upon with suspicion.

This is obvious as the need for translating the Quran arose in those historic circumstances when a large number of non-Arabic speaking people had embraced Islam, and giving new linguistic orientations to the contents of the revelation – as, for instance, happened in the case of the 'New Testament' – could have led to unforeseeable, and undesirable, developments within the body of the Islamic religion itself. (For a brief, though highly useful, survey of the Muslim attitudes towards the permissibility of translating the text of the revelation to non-Arabic tongues, see M. Ayoub, 'Translating the Meaning of the Quran Traditional Opinions and Modern Debates', in *Afkar Inquiry*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (Ramadan 1406May 1986), pp.34 9).

The Muslim need for translating the Quran into English arose mainly out of the desire to combat the missionary effort. Following a long polemical tradition, part of whose goal was also the production of a – usually erroneous and confounding – European version of the Muslim scripture, Christian missionaries started their offensive against a politically humiliated Islam in the eighteenth century by advancing their own translations of the Quran.

Obviously, Muslims could not allow the missionary effort – invariably confounding the authenticity of the text with a hostile commentary of its own – to go unopposed and unchecked. Hence, the Muslim decision to present a faithful translation of the Quranic text as well as an authentic summary of its teaching to the European world. Later, the Muslim translations were meant to serve even those Muslims whose only access to the Quranic revelation was through the medium of the European languages. Naturally, English was deemed the most important language for the Muslim purpose, not least because of the existence of the British Empire which after the Ottomans had the largest number of Muslim subjects.

The same rationale, however, applies to sectarian movements within Islam or even to renegade groups outside the fold of Islam, such as the Qadiyanis. Their considerable translational activities are motivated by the urge to proclaim their ideological uniqueness.

Although there is a spate of volumes on the multi-faceted dimensions of the Quran, no substantial work has so far been done to critically examine the mass of existing English translations of the Quran.

Even bibliographical material on this subject was quite scant before the fairly recent appearance of World Bibliography of the Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Quran (Istanbul, OIC Research Centre, 1986), which provides authoritative publication details of the translations of the Quran in sixty-five languages.

Some highly useful work in this field had been done earlier by Dr. Hamidullah of Paris. Appended to the Cambridge History of Arabic Literature Volume 1, Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period (Cambridge university Press, 1983) is a bibliography of the Quran translations into European languages, prepared by J.D. Pearson, as is the latter's article in the Encyclopaedia of Islam. It is, however, of not much use to the Muslim.

Since none of the above-mentioned works is annotated, the reader gets no idea about the translator's mental make-up, his dogmatic presuppositions and his approach to the Quran as well as the quality of the translation.

Similarly the small chapter entitled 'The Qur'an and Occidental Scholarship' in Bell and Watt's Introduction to the Qur'an (Edinburgh, 1970, pp. 173-86), although useful in providing background information to Orientalists' efforts in Quranic studies, and translations, more or less for the same reasons, is of little value to general Muslim readers. Thus, studies which focus on those aspects of each translation of the Quran are urgently needed lest Western scholars misguide the unsuspecting non-Arabic speaking readers of the Quran. An effort has been made in this survey to bring out the hallmarks and shortcomings of the major complete translations of the Quran.

The early English translations of the Quran by Muslims stemmed mainly from the pious enthusiasm on their part to refute the allegations leveled by the Christian missionaries against Islam in general and the Quran in particular.

Illustrative of this trend are the following translations

- (i) Mohammad Abdul Hakim Khan, The Holy Qur'an 'with short notes based on the Holy Qur'an or the authentic traditions of the Prophet, or and New Testaments or scientific truth. All fictitious romance, questionable history and disputed theories have been carefully avoided' (Patiala, 1905);
- (ii) Hairat Dehlawi, The Koran Prepared, by various Oriental learned scholars and edited by Mirza Hairat Dehlawi. Intended as 'a complete and exhaustive reply to the manifold criticisms of the Koran by various Christian authors such as Drs. Sale, Rodwell, Palmer and Sir W. Muir' (Delhi, 1912); and
- (iii) Mirzal Abu'l Fadl, Qur'an, Arabic Text and English Translation Arranged Chronologically with an Abstract (Allahabad, 1912).

Since none of these early translations was by a reputed Islamic scholar, both the quality of the translation and level of scholarship are not very high and these works are of mere historical interest.

Later works, however, reflect a more mature and scholarly effort.

Muhammad Marmaduke William Pickthall, an English man of letters who embraced Islam, holds the distinction of bringing out a first-rate rendering of the Qur'an in English, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (London, 1930).

It keeps scrupulously close to the original in elegant, though now somewhat archaic, English. However, although it is one of the most widely used English translations, it provides scant explanatory notes and background information. This obviously restricts its usefulness for an uninitiated reader of the Qur'an.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali's *The Holy Qur'an Translation and Commentary* (Lahore, 1934-37), perhaps the most popular translation, stands as another major achievement in this field. A civil servant by vocation, Yusuf Ali was not a scholar in the classical Muslim tradition. Small wonder, then, that some of his copious notes, particularly on hell and heaven, angels, jinn and polygamy, etc. are informed with the pseudo-rationalist spirit of his times, as for instance in the works of S. Ahmad and S. Ameer Ali.

His overemphasis on things spiritual also distorts the Qur'anic worldview. Against this is the fact that Yusuf Ali doubtless was one of the few Muslims who enjoyed an excellent command over the English language. It is fully reflected in his translation. Though his is more of a paraphrase than a literal translation, yet it faithfully represents the sense of the original.

Abdul Majid Daryabadi's *The Holy Qur'an with English Translation and Commentary* (Lahore, 1941-57) is, however, fully cognate with the traditional Muslim viewpoint.

Like Pickthall's earlier attempt, it is a faithful rendering, supplemented with useful notes on historical, geographical and eschatological issues, particularly the illuminating discussions on comparative religion. Though the notes are not always very exhaustive, they help to dispel the doubts in the minds of Westernized readers. However, it too contains inadequate background information about the Suras (chapters of the Quran) and some of his notes need updating.

*The Meaning of the Qur'an* (Lahore, 1967), the English version of Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi's magnum opus, the Urdu *Tafhim al-Quran* is an interpretative rendering of the Qur'an which remarkably succeeds in recapturing some of the majesty of the original.

Since Mawdudi, a great thinker, enjoyed rare mastery over both classical and modern scholarship, his work helps one develop an understanding of the Qur'an as a source of guidance. Apart from setting the verses/Suras in the circumstances of its time, the author constantly relates, through exhaustive notes, the universal message of the Qur'an to his own

time and its specific problems. His logical line of argument, generous sensibility, judicious use of classical Muslim scholarship and practical solutions to the problems of the day combine to show Islam as a complete way of life and as the Right Path for the whole of mankind. Since the translation of this invaluable work done by Muhammad Akbar is pitifully poor and uninspiring, the much-needed new English translation of the entire work is in progress under the auspices of the Islamic Foundation, Leicester.

The Message of the Quran by Muhammad Asad (Gibraltar, 1980) represents a notable addition to the body of English translations couched in chaste English. This work is nonetheless vitiated by deviation from the viewpoint of the Muslim orthodoxy on many counts. Averse to take some Qur'anic statements literally, Asad denies the occurrence of such events as the throwing of Abraham into the fire, Jesus speaking in the cradle, etc. He also regards Luqman, Khizr and Zulqarnain as 'mythical figures' and holds unorthodox views on the abrogation of verses. These blemishes apart, this highly readable translation contains useful, though sometimes unreliable background information about the Qur'anic Suras and even provides exhaustive notes on various Qur'anic themes.

The fairly recent The Qur'an The First American Version (Vermont, 1985) by another native Muslim speaker of English, T.B. Irving, marks the appearance of the latest major English translation. Apart from the obnoxious title, the work is bereft of textual and explanatory notes.

Using his own arbitrary judgment, Irving has assigned themes to each Qur'anic Ruku' (section). Although modern and forceful English has been used, it is not altogether free of instances of mistranslation and loose expressions. With American readers in mind, particularly the youth, Irving has employed many American English idioms, which, in places, are not befitting of the dignity of the Qur'anic diction and style.

In addition to the above, there are also a number of other English translations by Muslims, which, however, do not rank as significant ventures in this field.

They may be listed as

1. Al-Hajj Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar, Translation of the Holy Qur'an (Singapore, 1920)
2. Ali Ahmad Khan Jullundri, Translation of the Glorious Holy Qur'an with commentary (Lahore, 1962)
3. Abdur Rahman Tariq and Ziauddin Gilani, The Holy Qur'an Rendered into English (Lahore, 1966)
4. Syed Abdul Latif, Al-Qur'an Rendered into English (Hyderabad, 1969)
5. Hashim Amir Ali, The Message of the Qur'an Presented in Perspective (Tokyo, 1974)
6. Taqui al-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Explanatory English Translation of the Holy Qur'an A Summarized Version of Ibn Kathir Supplemented by At-Tabari with Comments from Sahih al-Bukhari (Chicago, 1977)
7. Muhammad Ahmad Mofassir, The Koran The First Tafsir in English (London, 1979)
8. Mahmud Y. Zayid, The Qur'an An English Translation of the Meaning of the Qur'an (checked)

and revised in collaboration with a committee of Muslim scholars) (Beirut, 1980)

9. S.M. Sarwar, The Holy Qur'an Arab Text and English Translation (Elmhurst, 1981)

10. Ahmed Ali, Al-Qur'an A Contemporary Translation (Karachi, 1984).

(In view of the blasphemous statements contained in Rashad Khalifa's The Qur'an The Final Scripture (Authorized English Version) (Tucson, 1978), it has not been included in the translations by Muslims).

Even amongst the Muslim translations, some are representative of the strong sectarian biases of their translators.

For example, the Shia doctrines are fully reflected in accompanying commentaries of the following books S.V. Mir Ahmad Ali, The Holy Qur'an with English Translation and Commentary, according to the version of the Holy Ahlul Bait includes 'special notes from Hujjatul Islam Ayatullah Haji Mirza Mahdi Pooya Yazdi on the philosophical aspects of the verses' (Karachi, 1964); M.H. Shakir, Holy Qur'an (New York, 1982); Syed Muhammad Hussain at-Tabatabai, al-Mizan An Exegesis of the Qur'an, translated from Persian into English by Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi (Tehran, 198~). So far five volumes of this work have been published.

Illustrative of the Barelvi sectarian stance is Holy Qur'an, the English version of Ahmad Raza Khan Brailai's Urdu translation, by Hanif Akhtar Fatmi (Lahore, n.d.).

As pointed out earlier, the Qadiyanis, though having abandoned Islam, have been actively engaged in translating the Qur'an. Apart from English, their translations are available in several European and African languages.

Muhammad Ali's The Holy Qur'an English Translation (Lahore, 1917) marks the beginning of this effort. This Qadiyanī translator is guilty of misinterpreting several Qur'anic verses, particularly those related to the Promised Messiah, his miracles and the Qur'anic angelology.

Similar distortions mar another Qadiyanī translation by Sher Ali, The Holy Qur'an Arabic Text with English Translation (Rabwah, 1955). Published under the auspices of Mirza Bashiruddin Mahmud Ahmad, second successor of the "Promised Messiah" and head of the Ahmadiyyas, this oft-reprinted work represents the official Qadiyanī version of the Qur'an. Unapologetically, Sher Ali refers to Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as the "Promised Messiah" and mistranslates and misinterprets a number of Qur'anic verses.

Zafarullah Khan's The Qur'an Arabic Text and English Translation (London, 1970) ranks as another notable Qadiyanī venture in this field. Like other Qadiyanis, Zafarullah too twists the Qur'anic verses to opine that the door of prophethood was not closed with the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). The obtrusion of similar obnoxious views upon the Qur'anic text is found in the following Qadiyanī translations, too

- (i) Kamaluddin and Nazir Ahmad, *A Running Commentary of the Holy Qur'an* (London, 1948)
- (ii) Salahuddin Peer, *The Wonderful Koran* (Lahore, 1960)
- (iii) Malik Ghulam Farid, *The Holy Qur'an* (Rabwah, 1962)
- (iv) Khadim Rahman Nuri, *The Running Commentary of the Holy Qur'an with under-bracket comments* (Shillong, 1964)
- (v) Firozuddin Ruhi, *The Qur'an* (Karachi, 1965)

Apart from the Qadiyanis, Christian missionaries have been the most active non-Muslim translators of the Qur'an. As already noted, origins of this inglorious tradition may be traced back to the anti-Islamic motives of the missionaries.

Small wonder, then that these ventures are far from being a just translation, replete as they are with frequent transpositions, omissions, unaccountable liberties and unpardonable faults.

A very crude specimen of the Orientalist-missionary approach to the Qur'an is found in Alexander Ross's *The Alcoran of Mahomet translated out of Arabique into French, by the Sieur Du Ryer...And newly Englished, for the satisfaction for all that desire to look into the Turkish vanities* (London, 1649).

In translating the Qur'an, the intention of Ross, a chaplain of King Charles I, was 'I thought good to bring it to their colours, that so viewing thine enemies in their full body, thou must the better prepare to encounter...his Alcoran.'

In the same rabidly anti-Islamic vein are the two appendices in the work entitled as (a) 'A Needful Caveat or Admonition, for them who desire to know what use may be made of or if there be danger in reading the Alcoran' (pp. 406-20) and 'The Life and Death of Mahomet the Prophet of the Turks and author of the Alcoran' (pp. 395-405).

George Sale, a lawyer brought out his *The Koran*, commonly called *The Al Koran of Mohammed* (London, 1734), which has been the most popular English translation. Sale's exhaustive 'Preliminary Discourse', dealing mainly with Sira and the Qur'an, betrays his deep hostility towards Islam and his missionary intent in that he suggests the rules to be observed for 'the conversion of Mohammedans' (q.v.).

As to the translation itself, it abounds in numerous instances of omission, distortion and interpolations.

Dissatisfied with Sale's work, J.M. Rodwell, Rector of St. Ethelberga, London, produced his translation entitled *The Koran* (London, 1861). Apart from hurling all sorts of wild and nasty allegations against the Prophet and the Qur'an in the Preface, Rodwell is guilty of having invented the so-called chronological Sura order of the Qur'an. Nor is his translation free from grave mistakes of translation and his own fanciful interpretations in the notes.

E.H. Palmer, a Cambridge scholar, was entrusted with the preparation of a new translation of the Qur'an for Max Muller's Sacred Books of the East series. Accordingly, his translation, *The Qur'an*, appeared in London in 1880. As to the worth of Palmer's translation, reference may be made to A. R. Nykl's article, 'Notes on E.H. Palmer's *The Qur'an*', published in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 56 (1936) pp. 77-84 in which no less than 65 instances of omission and mistranslation in Palmer's work have been pointed out.

Richard Bell, Reader of Arabic, University of Edinburgh, and an acknowledged Orientalist produced a translation of the Qur'an with special reference to its Sura order, as is evident from the title of his work, *The Qur'an translated with a critical rearrangement of the Surahs* (Edinburgh, 1937-39). In addition to describing the Prophet as the author of the Qur'an, Bell also believes that the Qur'an in its present form was 'actually written by Muhammad himself' (p. vi). In rearranging the Sura order of the Qur'an, Bell, in fact, makes a thorough mess of the traditional arrangement and tries to point out 'alterations substitutions and derangements in the text.

A.J. Arberry, a renowned Orientalist and Professor of Arabic at the Universities of London and Cambridge, has been, so far, the latest non-Muslim translator of the Qur'an.

Arberry's *The Koran Interpreted* (London, 1957) no doubt stands out above the other English renderings by non-Muslims in terms of both its approach and quality. Nonetheless, it is not altogether free from mistakes of omission and mistranslation, such as in Al' Imran 11143, Nisa' IV 72, 147 and 157, Ma'ida V 55 and 71, An'am VI 20, 105, A'raf VII 157, 158 and 199, Anfal VIII 17, 29, 41, 59, Yunus X 88, Hud XI 30 and 46 and Yusuf XII 61.

N.J. Dawood is perhaps the only Jew to have translated the Qur'an into English. Available in the Penguin edition, Dawood's translation, *The Koran* (London, 1956) is perhaps the most widely circulated non-Muslim English translation of the Qur'an. The author's bias against Islam is readily observable in the Introduction. Apart from adopting an unusual Sura order in his translation, Dawood is guilty also of having mistranslated the Qur'an in places such as Baqara II9 and A'raf VII31, etc.

No doubt, the peculiar circumstances of history which brought the Qur'an into contact with the English language have left their imprint on the non-Muslim as well as the Muslim bid to translate it. The results and achievements of their efforts leave a lot to be desired.

Unlike, for instance, major Muslim languages such as Persian, Turkish and Urdu, which have thoroughly exhausted indigenous linguistic and literary resources to meet the scholarly and emotional demands of the task, the prolific resources of the universal medium of English have not been fully employed in the service of the Qur'an.

The Muslim Scripture is yet to find a dignified and faithful expression in the English language that matches the majesty and grandeur of the original. The currents of history, however, seem

to be in favour of such a development. Even English is acquiring a native Muslim character and it is only a matter of time before we have a worthy translation of the Qur'an in that tongue.

Till then, the Muslim student should judiciously make use of Pickthall, A. Yusuf Ali, Asad and Irving, Even Arberry's stylistic qualities must not be ignored. Ultimately, of course, the Muslim should try to discover the original and not allow himself to be lost in a maze of translations and interpretations.

(Originally printed in The Muslim World Book Review, Vol. 7, No. 4 Summer 1987)

Taken with thanks from <http://www.ilmgate.org/>